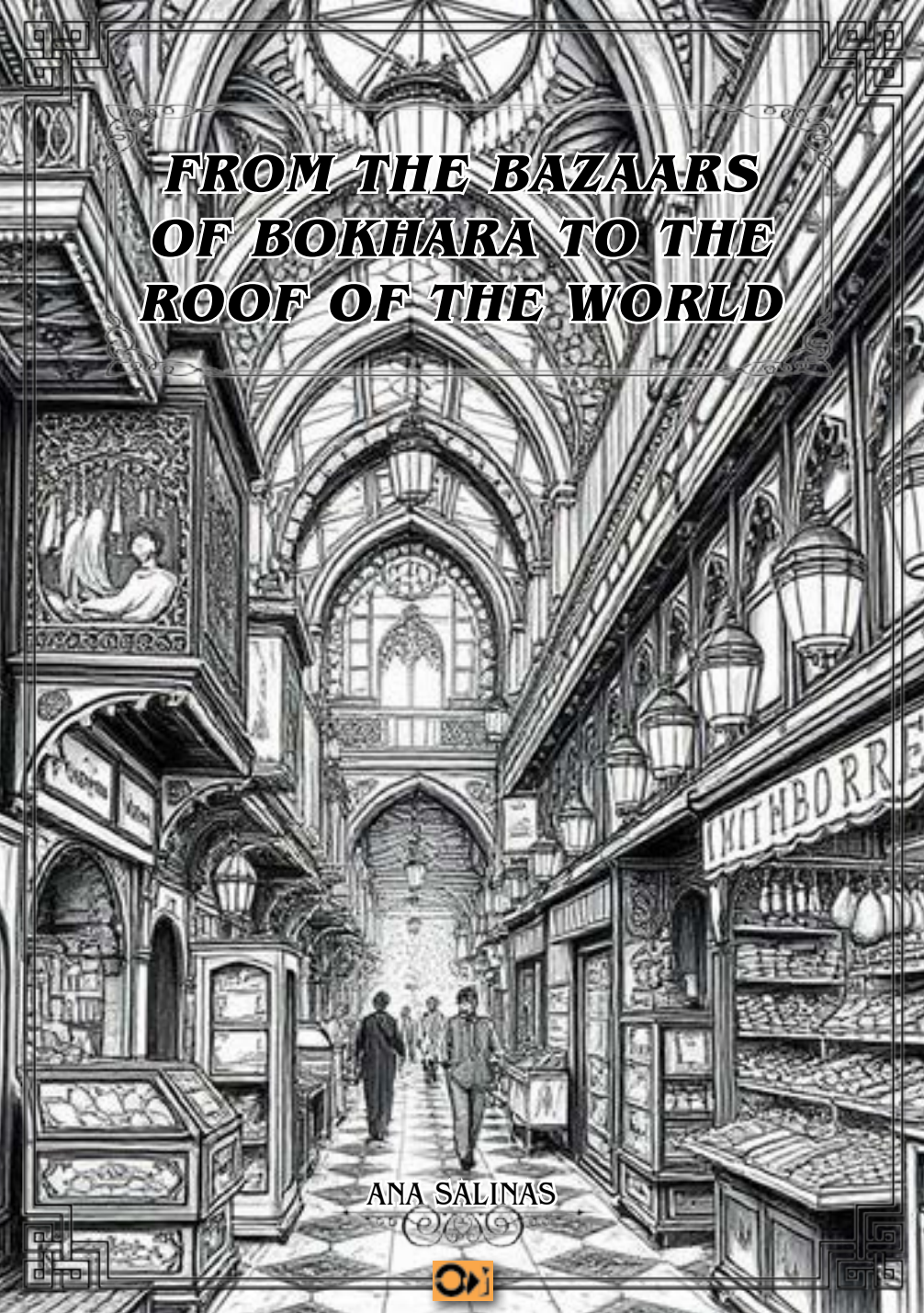
# FROM THE BAZAARS OF BOKHARA TO THE ROOF OF THE WORLD



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Ana Salinas

# From the bazaars of Bokhara to the roof of the world

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There are certain men, said my uncle, Professor Aronnax, whom Nature has endowed with a peculiar restlessness of the spirit. It is a fever of the mind that drives them from the warm hearth and the familiar street, propelling them towards the unknown, the inhospitable, and the mathematically improbable. I had always considered myself a man of the study, a classifier of data, until the day I met Dr. Théo Caspian.

It was in the autumn of 186-, amidst the fog-choked alleys of London, that I received a telegram whose brevity was matched only by its absurdity: *"If you seek the truth, come to the Geographical Society. Bring a stout pair of boots and your incredulity. – Caspian."*

I found the Doctor not in the hallowed reading rooms, but spread-eagled upon the great oak table

in the map room, his nose but an inch from a parchment so old and cracked it resembled the skin of a mummified pharaoh. He was a man of fifty, with a mane of white hair that seemed engaged in a constant state of electrical conflict with the comb, and eyes that held the unnerving gleam of a lighthouse beacon in a storm.

"Cyrus Harding was a fool to trust the currents of the Pacific!" he boomed by way of greeting, not looking up. "But this, Aronnax, *this* is the key!" He jabbed a finger at a faint, spidery line drawn across the desolate heart of Asia.

"This," I said, peering at the legend, "is the Silk Road. It is a well-documented trade route, Doctor. Camels, spices, silk. Fascinating, certainly, but not a matter for telegrams and sturdy boots."

Caspian finally rolled over and fixed me with that gimlet stare. "You see the road, Aronnax. You are a man of science, yet you see only what is on the surface. But what lies beneath it? What do the Chinese chronicles of the Han Dynasty whisper of? What did Marco Polo hint at in his veiled descriptions of the 'Roof of the World'?" He tapped the map violently. "A sea, Aronnax! A vast, inland sea, hidden in the impenetrable folds of the Pamir Mountains, a rem-

nant of the great Tethys Ocean, its waters saltier than death and its shores littered with the bones of explorers who sought it and failed!"

He produced a sheaf of notes, a chaotic palimpsest of citations from Ptolemy, ancient Sogdian texts, and the debriefings of half-mad Russian surveyors. "The logic is inescapable!" he thundered. "A geological impossibility, according to the Royal Society. A cartographical myth, according to my colleagues. Therefore, it must exist! For what is science, if not the glorious pursuit of the impossible?"

I was, I confess, swept up by his magnificent, irrefutable madness. Within a fortnight, our party was formed. There was Caspian, the brain; myself, Captain Hardwick of the Merchant Navy (for I know my way around a storm, if not a desert); and the indispensable Passepartout, my former valet, a man whose Gallic insouciance was matched only by his genius for procuring hot meals in the most godforsaken corners of the globe. Our destination: the fabled city of Bokhara, the gateway to the mountains, and the first step on our journey into the great, yawning unknown.

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Our expedition began not with a fanfare, but with a headache. The kind of headache induced by three days of being jostled inside a *tarantass*, a vehicle whose suspension seemed to have been designed by an engineer with a profound hatred for the human spine. From the Caspian Sea, we had steamed across its namesake lake, then transferred to this abominable conveyance for the long haul across the Kyzylkum Desert, the 'Red Sands'.

Dr. Caspian, however, was in his element. He hung out of the lurching carriage, binoculars glued to his eyes, identifying every species of wormwood and shouting meteorological observations into the howling wind. "Barometric pressure dropping, Hardwick! A sign of the immense orographic lift we shall encounter in the high Pamirs! This is splendid! Magnificent!"

"Splendid, sir?" muttered Passepartout, who was wedged between a crate of chronometers and a box of geological hammers. "My internal barometer tells me that my stomach is dropping with every jolt. If this is scientific progress, I long for the simple, stationary life of a Parisian waiter."

At last, the walls of Bokhara rose from the dun-coloured plain. It was a vision from the *Arabian Nights,*

a huddle of flat-roofed houses, pierced by the elegant, turquoise minarets of mosques, all encircled by a formidable wall of baked earth. It was a city that had seen the hoof beats of Alexander, the armies of Genghis Khan, and the caravans of a thousand merchants. We felt, in our modern tweed suits, like trespassers in a dream.

Our first task was to find a guide, and for that, we were directed to the great trading dome, the *Taq-i-Zargaron*, the bazaar of the jewellers. The noise was an assault: the cacophony of merchants haggling in a dozen tongues, the clanging of coppersmiths, the bleating of sheep, and the haunting wail of a flute from some hidden courtyard. The air was thick with the perfume of spices, cinnamon, cumin and saffron, that mingled with the sharper tang of sweat and untanned leather.

Passepartout, who had a horror of appearing provincial, was attempting to negotiate for a pomegranate. "Combien? How much for this magnificent specimen of… er… *Punica granatum*?" he asked a toothless vendor, employing his very loudest and most precise French.

The vendor simply stared, then spat a stream of invective that needed no translation. Passepartout re-

treated, pelted by a volley of what he later insisted were date stones.

“Patience, Passepartout,” I laughed. “Your Parisian charm is lost in translation here. Let us find this guide of Caspian’s.”

The Doctor had been corresponding with a man named Rustam, a Tajik of formidable reputation who was said to have guided the great explorer Alexei Fedchenko himself. We found him not in a teahouse, but in the centre of a heated argument. He was a giant of a man, with a face carved from the mountain rock we hoped to climb, all sharp cheekbones and a beard streaked with grey. He was gesturing wildly at a carpet.

“This is not silk!” Rustam roared in a mix of Russian and Turkic. “It is goat hair, dyed and polished! You would sell this to the Emir’s own vizier? You would have my head as well as his money, you son of a jackal!”

The carpet merchant, a wizened little man with eyes like currants, drew himself up with immense dignity. “The dogs bark, but the caravan passes,” he sniffed. “You are a mountain goat, Rustam, what do

you know of the loom?"

"A mountain goat knows fodder from filth!" Rustam shot back, his hand moving to the ornate knife at his belt.

It was at this moment that Dr. Caspian, with the unerring instinct of a man who has no sense of a tense situation, stepped directly between them. "Magnificent! The warp and weft! A truly fascinating example of textile degradation! Tell me, sir," he said to the furious merchant, "is this cochineal or madder root for the red dye? The scientific implications are profound!"

For a moment, the merchant was too stunned to speak. Then, with a shriek of rage, he snatched up a heavy wooden beater from his stall. Rustam reacted instantly, shoving Caspian aside and drawing his knife. Passepartout, seeing his employer threatened, valiantly threw the pomegranate he had been nursing, striking the merchant square on the forehead. The man staggered back into his own carpets, collapsing in a heap of silk and fury.

"A hit! A palpable hit!" cried Passepartout, astonished at his own success.

Rustam stared at us, his anger slowly turning into a booming laugh that echoed through the dome. “What manner of men are you?” he asked, sheathing his knife. “One talks of dead bugs in a rug, and the other fights with fruit?”

“We are the men who wish to hire you, Rustam,” I said, extending my hand. “I am Captain Hardwick. My friends have a habit of finding trouble, and I have a habit of getting them out of it. We need to go east. Into the mountains.”

Rustam looked at my hand, then at the prone merchant, then at Passepartout, who was bowing gracefully to the astonished onlookers. A slow smile spread across his weathered face. “For men who fight with pomegranates,” he said, gripping my hand in a vice, “the mountains will be a great amusement. Come, we will drink tea. And you,” he added, pointing a thick finger at a mortified Dr. Caspian, “will say nothing of dyes.”

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Our stay in Bokhara was brief. Rustam, after hearing Caspian’s wild theories about the hidden sea, did not laugh. He grew thoughtful, his dark eyes gazing towards the distant, snow-capped peaks that were

just visible on the eastern horizon.

"There is a place my grandfather spoke of," he said quietly, one evening in a fragrant courtyard. "A place the Kyrgyz nomads call *Sary-Chelek*, the Yellow Cup. They say it is a lake that sits in the very lap of the mountains, so high that the stars drink from its waters at night. But it is a hard road. Bandits swarm in the passes like flies on a carcass."

"Bandits!" cried Caspian, clapping his hands with delight. "Of course! The natural hazard of unexplored territory! This is perfect!"

Passepartout paled. "Perfect, Monsieur le Docteur? The word 'carcass' was just used in conjunction with our travel plans."

Despite the dangers, we pressed on, first to the fabled city of Samarkand. We stood in the vast Registan square, its madrasahs covered in a thousand shades of blue tile, and felt the weight of Tamerlane's empire pressing down upon us. It was here that Passepartout attempted to buy a lamb for our supper, a transaction that somehow escalated into a misunderstanding involving a donkey, a water pipe, and a three-legged dog, from which Rustam had to extricate him with a combination of threats and silver coins.

"It spoke to me, Captain!" Passepartout insisted as we fled the scene. "The dog, it looked at me with such hunger, such *je ne sais quoi*. I was merely trying to share our fortune."

The real journey began as we left the green valleys behind and entered the stark, brutal grandeur of the Pamir Mountains. The air grew thin and cold. Our horses, sturdy Yomud ponies, struggled for breath on the steep, winding trails. The path was a nightmare, a narrow ledge carved into sheer rock faces, with a roaring glacial river a thousand feet below. We travelled in single file, the silence broken only by the clatter of hooves on stone and the ominous rumble of distant avalanches.

It was on the fourth day in this vertical world that our greatest peril found us. We were traversing a high plateau, a desolate landscape of rock and scree, when Rustam held up a hand. He pointed. A plume of dust was rising from a valley to our south, moving with unnatural speed. "Horsemen," he said, his voice tight. "Many of them. And they are not herders."

Our peaceful journey was at an end. Within the hour, they were upon us. A ragged horde of Kirghiz brigands, their faces hidden behind fur hoods, their eyes glittering with the promise of plunder. They en-

circled us, yipping and firing their long rifles into the air. Escape was impossible. We were trapped on a barren plain with no cover, a thousand miles from any hope of rescue.

Their leader, a one-eyed giant with a scar where his other eye should have been, rode forward. He pointed at our horses, our crates of equipment, and finally at us. The words he spoke needed no translation: *You are ours.*

Rustam tried to negotiate, but was met with a sneer. The bandits began to dismount, their intentions clear. Passepartout, his face as white as the mountain snow, pressed close to me. "Captain," he whispered, his voice trembling but his spirit unbroken, "I don't suppose you have a plan? Or, perchance, another pomegranate?"

I had my revolver, but we were outnumbered twenty to one. To fire would be suicide. I looked at Caspian, expecting to see terror. Instead, I saw a look of intense concentration. He was staring not at the bandits, but at the ground beneath their feet.

And then, he laughed. A high, clear, triumphant laugh that cut through the cold air like a knife.

"You idiots!" he cried in French, pointing a shaking finger at the bandit leader. "You absolute, magnificent idiots! You've done it! You've led us straight to it!"

The bandit leader paused, confused by the foreigner's outburst. He looked behind him, suspecting a trick. Caspian turned to us, his eyes wild with a scientific ecstasy that bordered on mania. "Don't you see? The rock! The strata! It's Jurassic! Upper Jurassic! And the salt flats! We've been following them for miles, but this… this is a different deposit entirely! Hardwick, my boy, we are standing on the ancient shoreline! The sea is just beyond that ridge! It must be!"

The bandits, of course, understood not a word. But they understood madness. And in a man, madness is more terrifying than courage. The one-eyed leader hesitated, his single eye darting from Caspian's manic grin to the empty ridge he pointed at. He saw nothing but rocks, but the Frenchman's conviction was absolute. Was it a trap? A spell?

Caspian, taking their hesitation as an invitation, spurred his pony forward, straight through the startled ring of horsemen, and began galloping towards the ridge, still shouting about the Jurassic period.

"After him!" I roared, and we followed, Rustam letting out a war cry that seemed to shake the very stones.

The bandits, utterly confounded by this inexplicable charge of madmen, did nothing for a crucial three seconds. By the time they recovered and gave chase, we had a head start. We crested the ridge, and the world fell away.

Below us, cradled in a colossal bowl of granite and ice, lay a lake. It was not a mirage. It was real, its surface a deep, impossible blue, ruffled by a wind that had not touched us on the ridge. It was vast, stretching for miles, its far shores lost in the haze. The lost sea of the Pamir. It existed.

For a moment, even the bandits paused, stunned by the magnificent sight. Caspian was weeping, tears freezing on his cheeks. But the moment was brief. The bandits' greed for our supplies outweighed their superstitious awe. With a howl, they surged forward.

Our path was blocked by the lake. There was nowhere left to run. Passepartout looked at the freezing water, then at the onrushing horde. He turned to me, a look of profound philosophical resignation on his face.

“Well, Captain,” he said, with a final, defiant shred of Gallic wit, “it appears the journey is over. Shall we swim for it? Or shall we stay and explain the geological significance of our demise to our one-eyed friend?”

The choice, it seemed, was between a bullet and a frozen grave. And as the brigands closed in, their victory howls echoing off the peaks of the Roof of the World, neither option offered much in the way of a happy ending.

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They took everything. Our horses, our instruments, our supplies, even Passe’s cherished bottle of *eau de cologne*. Stripped to our travelling clothes, we were left shivering on the shore of that accursed, magnificent lake, the laughter of our captors ringing in our ears as they disappeared back over the ridge.

“Thus,” Caspian murmured, his voice devoid of its earlier triumph, “ends the expedition. We have found the sea. A magnificent discovery. And it will be our tomb.”

For three days we huddled in a rocky shelter, chewing on bitter roots Rustam identified and licking

moisture from seeps in the cliff face. On the third night, the storm hit. It was not a mere snow flurry, but a cataclysm. The wind roared down from the highest peaks with the force of a physical blow, carrying ice particles that scoured our skin. The temperature plummeted.

We knew we would not see the dawn. Huddled together for a warmth that would not come, we fell into a final, dreamless sleep.

I awoke to silence. The wind had stopped. And I was warm. Impossibly, miraculously warm. I opened my eyes to see not the grey rock of our shelter, but a canopy of thick, smoke-stained felt. The air was thick with the smell of rancid butter, woodsmoke, and boiled mutton.

I tried to move, but a weight on my chest prevented me. Looking down, I saw Passepartout's head, his face peaceful in sleep. Around us, in the dim light of a yak-dung fire, lay Caspian and Rustam, buried under a mountain of heavy furs. We were in a Kyrgyz *yurt*.

A gnarled old woman, her face a map of a hundred winters, saw that I was awake. She cackled, a sound like stones rattling in a pot, and gestured to the fire.

Through Rustam, who awoke with a start, we pieced together the story.

The storm, which we had seen as our executioner, had been our salvation. The bandits, caught in the open by its full fury, had been scattered. Their horses, panicked, had bolted. Our own mounts, trained to seek shelter, had found their way to this high summer pasture, dragging our half-frozen bodies with them.

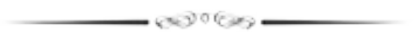
Our journey was over. The lost sea was found, its existence proven by our suffering. Of our equipment, our notes, and our proud scientific ambitions, only our lives remained. Dr. Caspian, staring into the fire that had saved us, seemed smaller, older. The manic light in his eyes had dimmed, replaced by a quiet, profound humility.

"Science," he said at last, his voice a whisper, "is not in the instruments. It is not in the maps. It is here." He touched his heart. "And it has been taught a harsh lesson by the indifference of the universe."

We had set out to conquer the unknown, armed with logic and arrogance. We were saved by a storm, a horse, and the kindness of a nomadic people who asked no questions. The sea would remain in its icy

cradle, its secrets intact, a silent testament to the folly and the grandeur of human ambition. And we, the survivors, would carry its image in our minds forever, a beautiful, terrible, and utterly unforgiving truth.

**The end**



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# FROM THE BAZAARS OF BOKHARA TO THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

**Ana Salinas**, a desk worker trapped in a cubicle, dreams of escaping to the moon in a hot air balloon, much like Phileas Fogg, though she suspects Jules Verne may have exaggerated the comfort of those Victorian contraptions.

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